

Commentary

Way of the Healer—The Work of Healing and the Healing of Work

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It is always a mistake to complain about the circumstances of our life, for they are the outward expression of what we are ourselves.

The Mother of Pondicherry
SRI AUROBINDO¹

As a practice and profession, health care is being scrutinized as never before. Economic, political, and social pressures affect the institutions and individuals involved in health care in profound and far-reaching ways. From cost containment to access to rationing, our principles and practices as health care professionals are questioned, analyzed, and monitored. We are confronted with external pressures and influences that stimulate internal responses of anger, frustration, and resignation. Wisdom from other systems of medical practice and healing can help us adapt to the contemporary challenges of our personal and professional lives.

In western societies, relief from disease and the restoration of health and healing are often considered to come from professionals, trusted community representatives, hospitals, pharmaceutical agents, and technologic devices and maneuvers. Yet, we know from our own experience and the experiences of other cultures that diet, movement, touch, aroma, sound, quiet, solitude, light, beauty, plants, animals, and prayer also have healing effects. The knowledge implicit in this recognition, along with the realization that we are responsible for our own health, opens us to the truth present in healing practices and traditions other than those of contemporary western biotechnical medicine. An open-minded, multicultural exploration of other ways of knowing and healing does not require us to leave our tradition but, rather, to learn to listen to the truths of other traditions.

By such listening, we can better appreciate the contributions of traditional Chinese and Tibetan medicine, ayurvedic medicine, tribal healers, and many other practices. These systems, along with western medicine, are like fingers on the same hand, tributaries of the same river, wells tapping into the same aquifer. All are aspects and means to restoring health. Varied healing practices are all part of the "Great Medicine" of Native Americans, a concept that involves living in perfect harmony with

the Earth and the "Great Mystery." Each tradition offers something to the big picture. There are many paths. Often the paths appear to merge, as can be seen in a thought recorded early in the 20th century by the Indian philosopher, Sri Aurobindo:

We laugh at the savage for his faith in the medicine man; but how are the civilized less superstitious who have faith in the doctors? The savage finds that when a certain incantation is repeated, he often recovers from a certain disease; he believes. The civilized patient finds that when he doses himself according to a certain prescription, he often recovers from a certain disease; he believes.^{1(pp65-66)}

In both traditions, belief is important despite the occurrence of different physiologic processes.

An expanded view of health and healing challenges how we perceive ourselves, our patients, our institutions, and our world. Albert Einstein said that "... the unleashed power of the atom has changed everything except our way of thinking. We need an essentially new way of thinking if mankind is to survive." We cannot continue to look at the body merely as a cholesterol level, a broken bone, a transplanted organ, or "the gallbladder in room 455." We can look at our body as a machine, or we can see it as a physical vehicle of our earthly journey. We can look at the body as a trap, or we can see it as a temple. We can look at the body as clay, or we can see it as the ether, the void, a great emptiness filled with potential—certainly a view not dispelled by particle theory or the "new" physics. In fact, the methods and truths of science and scientific inquiry in no way obstruct our capacity to accept truths from other sources. Science and scientific method provide us a fluid path with which to accept changes as knowledge expands. The flat world of Columbus's time gave way to new ideas; Newton's concept of physics has been supplanted by Einstein's. We need to expand our conception of our health care institutions as well. The hospital too often is described with negative connotations as prison, repair shop, or department store. Considering what goes on there—birth, healing, death—the hospital would better be seen as a temple, a sanctuary, a garden.

The seeking of health is a powerful and accessible metaphor. It is a metaphor for the search to comprehend the mystery that pervades our existence. In the pursuit of

(Stewart WB: Way of the healer—The work of healing and the healing of work. *West J Med* 1993; 158:629-630)

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Adapted from material presented at Ways of the Healer Symposium sponsored by the Program in Medicine and Philosophy, California Pacific Medical Center, San Francisco, March 1992.

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health, we are seeking to create balance, harmony, and joy, to eliminate pain and suffering, and to gain knowledge, understanding, and truth. This is a dynamic, evolutionary, personal quest into the mystery that surrounds us—our professional struggle with illness recapitulates our personal struggle with meaning. Here, the scientific and spiritual searches for truth overlap. Technology and mythology meeting at the boundary of seen and unseen, measurable and unmeasurable, matter and energy. By adding the vision and wisdom of other traditions to our own, we become better equipped for this metaphoric exploration.

How do we go about this expansive, multicultural search, this personal journey, and this professional work? How do we honestly and healthfully respond to the challenges and demands of our lives? Is there a way of the contemporary healer? Two suggestions from Aurobindo can guide us:

- If you want to change the world, first change yourself; and
- It is only in quietness and peace that one can know what is the best thing to do.

To be effective, compassionate, and generous healers, we must first heal ourselves. We must have the courage, will, and determination to be generous and compassionate with ourselves. In part, we do this by acknowledging the need for quiet, for calm, for stillness to pursue our personal search for truth. This might take the form of mindful

work, relaxation, study, walking, jogging, prayer, meditation, or any number of other techniques. It does require, regardless of the form, that we change, avoid, and ignore or forgive the relentless din of often mindless distraction and meaningless noise that engulfs us much of the time. Only in a state of quiet calm can we begin to hear the voice of our inner truths.

As we encounter and deal with the challenges of medical practice, we must acknowledge that these circumstances reflect, not define, our lives. Our work needs fill us, not empty us. If creating health and healing are our work, they should be practiced in the spirit of Gibran's prophet:

Work is love made visible. . . .
 For if you bake bread with indifference,
 You bake a bitter bread that feeds but half man's hunger.
 And if you grudge the crushing of the grapes,
 your grudge distills a poison in the wine.
 And what is it to work with love?
 It is to weave the cloth with threads drawn
 from your heart, even as if your
 beloved were to wear that cloth. . . .
 It is to sow seeds with tenderness and
 reap the harvest with joy even as if
 your beloved were to eat the fruit.
 It is to charge all things you fashion
 with a breath of your own spirit.^{2(pp27-28)}

REFERENCES

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